

DADS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Watch DOGS volunteers give back to students at Stanley Elementary

Written by Noreen Stavinoha | Select Photography by Suzi Issa

When Jessica Wilson moved to Katy and enrolled her daughter in Stanley Elementary School, she noticed immediately how the campus could benefit from having a Watch DOGS (Dads of Great Students) program. She had seen the program at work in the school her daughter had previously attended in Round Rock and was passionate about getting it started in Katy. So Wilson didn't waste any time in sitting down with Principal Kerri Finnesand to tell her about the program.

"When she pitched the program to me, I couldn't see any negatives," shares Finnesand. "We have so many moms involved in school, why not the dads? Most of the kids' perception of their dads is [that] they are so busy, they work all day, and [they] can't take a day off to spend here."

Showing Students They Care

With the principal's blessing, Wilson went to work contacting men to serve on the Top Dog committee to get the project rolling. Justin Flanagan was one of the first contacts, and he found the idea of spending time at school pretty powerful. "Typically, when a dad showed up on campus, it was because his kid was in trouble, and this positive side is what drew me to it," says Flanagan.

Fellow Top Dog committee member Michael Flores shares, "In our society, a lot of the problems that we see are due to the absence of fathers. We leave our children behind to pursue careers or whatever. So for me, it was an opportunity to influence someone other than my child, [and] to let them know that men do care, that men do love them."

During the 2011 program kickoff, 250 dads signed up to participate, resulting in at least one Watch DOGS volunteer on campus every day school is in session. The school's namesake, Stan C. Stanley has seen the benefits of the program in students' lives. "This is the greatest blessing of my life," says Stanley. "What these guys are doing is incredible. We have such a great mix of all ethnicities, and they've come together with one purpose in mind: to spend a day with their kids."

Lending a Helping Hand

It is important to note that the Watch DOGS program is open to both dads and other men in a child's life. There are grandfathers, uncles, and mentors who volunteer for this important work, too. Everyone at Stanley Elementary was made aware of the presence of these dads and father figures, as well as how important it is to use their talents while they are volunteering on campus. It soon became clear the Watch DOGS were going to be a valuable asset. They help in the front office, cafeteria, classrooms, and library.

"The students are excited that someone else besides their teacher is interested in what they are doing and what they're learning," says Finnesand. Watch DOGS volunteers also provide an extra pair of hands to help with student activities, and one teacher even has a dad change her bulletin board every week. In short, there are plenty of tasks to make them feel useful.

Campus Rock Stars

When a Watch DOGS volunteer arrives on campus, he checks in like any visitor and gets his security badge.



Justin Flanagan enjoys volunteering at Stanley Elementary, where both his daughters attend school.



Students love when their dads help out at school for the day and treat them like campus rock stars.

Watch DOGS volunteer John Austin and his daughter Madison

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– Stan Stanley, campus namesake of Stanley Elementary



Then someone gives him his schedule for the day and a brief orientation, known as “walking the DOG.” He is photographed with his child and introduced in the morning announcements, so everyone knows who he is.

For the rest of the day, every kid they meet in the halls greets them with a high five and a grin and sometimes even a request for an autograph. They are rock stars. The pride they see in their own kids’ eyes is a big payoff for these guys, and they can see that their presence helps their children to make friends.

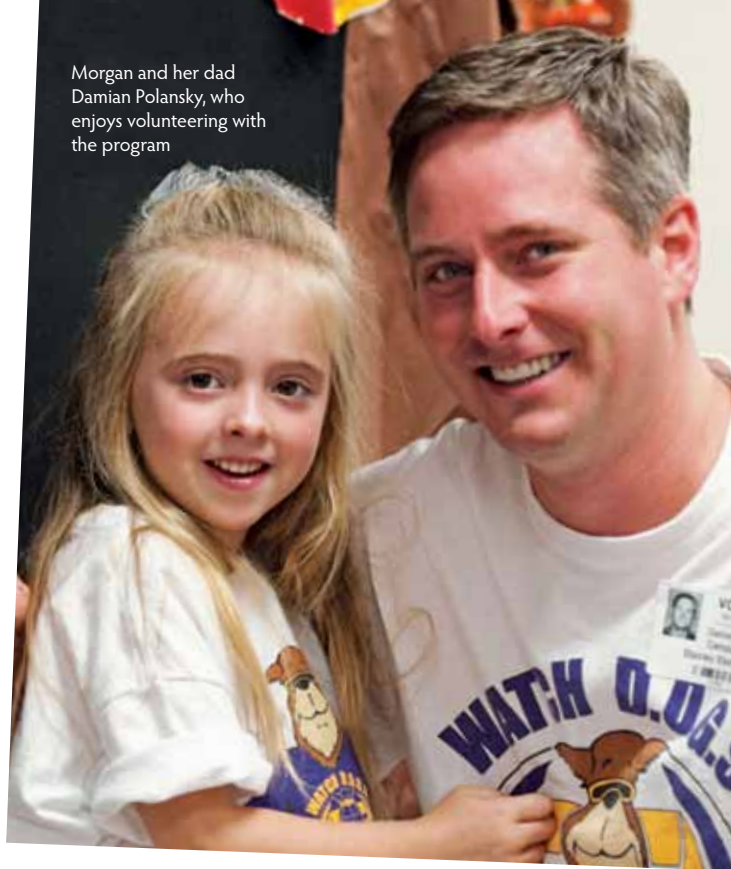
Making Their Mark

The first day that Flanagan volunteered in the cafeteria, he was teased about the apron that every cafeteria helper wears to hold the extra napkins, straws, and condiments to pass out to the kids when needed. So he went to Home Depot and bought a tool belt, put a Watch DOGS sticker on it, and put it in the cafeteria. Now all of the Watch DOGS volunteers wear it when they have that duty.

Men who volunteer in this capacity have all gained a new appreciation for the school and the teachers who teach their kids. Before volunteering, most had no idea what it takes to run a school this size or what goes on in the classroom until they actually got to be part of it. KM

NOREEN STAVINOH lives in Katy with her husband and miniature schnauzer and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.

Morgan and her dad Damian Polansky, who enjoys volunteering with the program



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